Wild man

The **wild man** (also **wildman**, or "wildman of the woods") is a mythical figure that appears in the artwork and literature of medieval Europe, comparable to the satyr or faun type in classical mythology and to *Silvanus*, the Roman god of the woodlands.

The defining characteristic of the figure is its "wildness"; from the 12th century, they were consistently depicted as being covered with hair. Images of wild men appear in the carved and painted roof bosses where intersecting ogee vaults meet in Canterbury Cathedral, in positions where one is also likely to encounter the vegetal Green Man. The image of the wild man survived to appear as supporter for heraldic coats-of-arms, especially in Germany, well into the 16th century. Renaissance engravers in Germany and Italy were particularly fond of wild men, wild women, and wild families, with examples from Martin Schongauer (died 1491) and Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) among others.

Wild men support coats of arms in the side panels of a portrait by Albrecht Dürer, 1499 (Alte Pinakothek, Munich).

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Terminology

Late 15th century tapestry from Basel, showing a woodwose being tamed by a virtuous lady

A common Middle English term for the figure was **woodwose** or **wodewose** (also spelled *woodehouse*, *wudwas* etc., understood perhaps as variously singular or plural).[1][2] *Wodwos*[3] occurs in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (c. 1390).[4] The Middle English word is first attested for the 1340s, in references to the "wild man" decorative artwork popular at the time, in a Latin description of an embroidery of the Great Wardrobe of Edward III,[5] but as a surname it is found as early as 1251, of one *Robert de Wudewuse*. In reference to an actual legendary or mythological creature, the term is found during the 1380s, in Wycliffe's Bible, translating שעיר (LXX δαιμόνια, Latin *pilosi* meaning "hairy") in Isaiah 13:21[6] The occurrences in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* date to soon after Wycliffe's Bible, to c. 1390.[7]

The Old English form of *woodwose* is unattested, but it would have been either **wudu-wāsa* or **wude-wāsa*. The first element is usually explained as from *wudu* "wood, forest".[2] The second element is less clear. It has been identified as a hypothetical noun **wāsa* "being", from the verb *wesan*, *wosan* "to be, to be alive".[8] It might alternatively mean a forlorn or abandoned person, cognate with German *Waise* and Dutch *wees* which both mean "orphan".

Old High German had the terms *schrat*, *scrato* or *scrazo*, which appear in glosses of Latin works as translations for *fauni*, *silvestres*, or *pilosi*, identifying the creatures as hairy woodland beings.[2] Some of the local names suggest associations with characters from ancient mythology. Common in Lombardy and the Italian-speaking parts of the Alps are the terms *salvan* and *salvang*, which derive from the Latin *Silvanus*, the name of the Roman tutelary god of gardens and the countryside.[2] Similarly, folklore in Tyrol and German-speaking Switzerland into the 20th century included a wild woman known as *Fange* or *Fanke*, which derives from the Latin *fauna*, the feminine form of *faun*.[2] Medieval German sources give as names for the wild woman *lamia* and *holzmoia* (or some variation);[9] the former clearly refers to the Greek wilderness demon Lamia while the latter derives ultimately from Maia, a Greco-Roman earth and fertility goddess who is identified elsewhere with Fauna and who exerted a wide influence on medieval wild-man lore.[2] Slavic has *leshy* "forest man".

The Fight in the Forest, drawing by Hans Burgkmair, possibly of a scene from the Middle High German poem *Sigenot*, about Dietrich von Bern

Various languages and traditions include names suggesting affinities with Orcus, a Roman and Italic god of death.[2] For many years people in Tyrol called the wild man *Orke*, *Lorke*, or *Noerglein*, while in parts of Italy he was the *orco* or *huorco*.[10] The French ogre has the same derivation,[10] as do modern literary orcs.[11] Importantly, Orcus is associated with Maia in a dance celebrated late enough to be condemned in a 9th- or 10th-century Spanish penitential.[12]

The term was usually replaced in literature of the Early Modern English period by classically derived equivalents, or "wild man", but it survives in the form of the surname *Wodehouse* or *Woodhouse* (see Wodehouse family). "Wild man" and its cognates is the common term for the creature in most modern languages;[2] it appears in German as *wilder Mann*, in French as *homme sauvage* and in Italian as *uomo selvatico* "forest man".[13]

Origins

Figures similar to the European wild man occur worldwide from very early times. The earliest recorded example of the type is the character Enkidu of the ancient Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*.[14]

The description of Nebuchadnezzar II in the Book of Daniel (2nd century BC) greatly influenced the medieval European concepts.[15] Daniel 4 depicts God humbling the Babylonian king for his boastfulness; stricken mad and ejected from human society, he grows hair on his body and lives like a beast. This image was popular in medieval depictions of Nebuchadnezzar. Similarly, late medieval legends of Saint John Chrysostom (died 407) describe the saint's asceticism as making him so isolated and feral that hunters who capture him cannot tell if he is man or beast.[16]

The medieval wild-man concept also drew on lore about similar beings from the Classical world such as the Roman faun and Silvanus, and perhaps even Heracles. Several folk traditions about the wild man correspond with ancient practices and beliefs. Notably, peasants in the Grisons tried to capture the wild man by getting him drunk and tying him up in hopes that he would give them his wisdom in exchange for freedom.[17] This suggests an association with an ancient tradition – recorded as early as Xenophon (d. 354 BC) and appearing in the works of Ovid, Pausanias, and Claudius Aelianus – in which shepherds caught a forest being, here termed Silenus or Faunus, in the same manner and for the same purpose.[17]

Pontus and his train disguised as wild men at the wedding of Genelet and Sidonia. Illustration of a manuscript of a German version of *Pontus and Sidonia* (CPG 142, fol. 122r, c. 1475).

Besides mythological influences, medieval wild man lore also drew on the learned writings of ancient historians, though likely to a lesser degree.[18] These ancient wild men are naked and sometimes covered with hair, though importantly the texts generally localize them in some faraway land,[18] distinguishing them from the medieval wild man who was thought to exist just at the boundaries of civilization. The first historian to describe such beings, Herodotus (c. 484 BC – c. 425 BC), places them in western Libya alongside the headless men with eyes in their chest and dog-faced creatures.[19] After the appearance of the former Persian court physician Ctesias's book *Indika* (concerning India), which recorded Persian beliefs about the subcontinent, and the conquests of Alexander the Great, India became the primary home of fantastic creatures in the Western imagination, and wild men were frequently described as living there.[19] Megasthenes, Seleucus I Nicator's ambassador to Chandragupta Maurya, wrote of two kinds of men to be found in India whom he explicitly describes as wild: first, a creature brought to court whose toes faced backwards; second, a tribe of forest people who had no mouths and who sustained themselves with smells.[20] Both Quintus Curtius Rufus and Arrian refer to Alexander himself meeting with a tribe of fish-eating savages while on his Indian campaign.[21]

Distorted accounts of apes may have contributed to both the ancient and medieval conception of the wild man. In his *Natural History* Pliny the Elder describes a race of *silvestres*, wild creatures in India who had humanoid bodies but a coat of fur, fangs, and no capacity to speak – a description that fits gibbons indigenous to the area.[20] The ancient Carthaginian explorer Hanno the Navigator (fl. 500 BC) reported an encounter with a tribe of savage men and hairy women in what may have been Sierra Leone; their interpreters called them "Gorillae," a story which much later originated the name of the gorilla species and could indeed have related to a great ape.[20][22] Similarly, the Greek historian Agatharchides describes what may have been chimpanzees as tribes of agile, promiscuous "seed-eaters" and "wood-eaters" living in Ethiopia.[23]

Medieval representations

Some of the earliest evidence for the wild-man tradition appears in the above-mentioned 9th- or 10th-century Spanish penitential.[12] This book, likely based on an earlier Frankish source, describes a dance in which participants donned the guise of the figures Orcus, Maia, and Pela, and ascribes a minor penance for those who participate with what was apparently a resurgence of an older pagan custom.[12] The identity of Pela is unknown, but the earth goddess Maia appears as the wild woman (*Holz-maia* in the later German glossaries), and names related to Orcus were associated with the wild man through the Middle Ages, indicating that this dance was an early version of the wild-man festivities celebrated through the Middle Ages and surviving in parts of Europe through modern times.[12]

Wild people, in the margins of a late 14th-century Book of Hours

As the name implies, the main characteristic of the wild man is his wildness. Civilized people regarded wild men as beings of the wilderness, the antithesis of civilization.[24] Other characteristics developed or transmuted in different contexts. From the earliest times, our sources associated wild men with hairiness; by the 12th century they were almost invariably described as having a coat of hair covering their entire bodies except for their hands, feet, faces above their long beards, and the breasts and chins of the females.[25]

Celtic mythology

The 9th-century Irish tale *Buile Shuibhne*[26] (*The Madness of Sweeney*) describes how Shuibhne or Sweeney, the pagan king of the Dál nAraidi in Ulster, assaults the Christian bishop Ronan Finn and is cursed with madness as a result. He begins to grow feathers and talons as the curse runs its full course, flies like a bird, and spends many years travelling naked through the woods, composing verses among other madmen. In order to be forgiven by God, King Suibhne composes a beautiful poem of praise to God before he dies. There are further poems and stories recounting the life and madness of King Suibhne.[27] The Welsh told a similar story about Myrddin Wyllt, the origin of the Merlin of later romance. In these stories, Myrddin is a warrior in the service of King Gwenddoleu ap Ceidio at the time of the Battle of Arfderydd. When his lord is killed at the battle, Myrddin travels to the Caledonian Forest in a fit of madness which endows him with the ability to compose prophetic poetry; a number of later prophetic poems are attributed to him.[28] *The Life of Saint Kentigern* includes almost the same story, though here the madman of Arfderydd is instead named Lailoken, which may be the original name.[26] The fragmentary 16th-century Breton text *An Dialog Etre Arzur Roe D'an Bretounet Ha Guynglaff* (*Dialog Between Arthur and Guynglaff*) tells of a meeting between King Arthur and the wild man Guynglaff, who predicts events which will occur as late as the 16th century.[29]

Geoffrey of Monmouth recounts the Myrddin Wyllt legend in his Latin *Vita Merlini* of about 1150, though here the figure has been renamed "Merlin". According to Geoffrey, after Merlin witnessed the horrors of the battle:

> ...a strange madness came upon him. He crept away and fled to the woods, unwilling that any should see his going. Into the forest he went, glad to lie hidden beneath the ash trees. He watched the wild creatures grazing on the pasture of the glades. Sometimes he would follow them, sometimes pass them in his course. He made use of the roots of plants and of grasses, of fruit from

> trees and of the blackberries in the thicket. He became a Man of the Woods, as if dedicated to the woods. So for a whole summer he stayed hidden in the woods, discovered by none, forgetful of himself and of his own, lurking like a wild thing.

Slavic mythology

Wild (divi) people are the characters of the Slavic folk demonology, mythical forest creatures.[30] Names go back to two related Slavic roots **dik-* and **div-*, combining the meaning of "wild" and "amazing, strange".

In the East Slavic sources referred: Saratov *dikar, dikiy, dikoy, dikenkiy muzhichok* – leshy; a short man with a big beard and tail; Ukrainian *lisovi lyudi* – old men with overgrown hair who give silver to those who rub their nose; Kostroma *dikiy* chort; Vyatka *dikonkiy* unclean spirit, sending paralysis; Ukrainian *lihiy div* – marsh spirit, sending fever; Ukrainian Carpathian *dika baba* – an attractive woman in seven-league boots, sacrifices children and drinks their blood, seduces men.[30] There are similarities between the East Slavic reports about wild people and book legends about *diviy* peoples (unusual people from the medieval novel "Alexandria") and mythical representations of miraculous peoples. For example, Russians from Ural believe that *divnye lyudi* are short, beautiful, have a pleasant voice, live in caves in the mountains, can predict the future; among the Belarusians of Vawkavysk uyezd, the *dzikie lyudzi* – one-eyed cannibals living overseas, also drink lamb blood; among the Belarusians of Sokółka uyezd, the overseas *dzikij narod* have grown wool, they have a long tail and ears like an ox; they do not speak, but only squeal.[30]

Speculum Regale

A wild man is described in the book *Konungs skuggsjá* (*Speculum Regale* or "the King's Mirror"), written in Norway about 1250:

> It once happened in that country (and this seems indeed strange) that a living creature was caught in the forest as to which no one could say definitely whether it was a man or some other animal; for no one could get a word from it or be sure that it understood human speech. It had the human shape, however, in every detail, both as to hands and face and feet; but the entire body was covered with hair as the beasts are, and down the back it had a long coarse mane like that of a horse, which fell to both sides and trailed along the ground when the creature stooped in walking.

Late Medieval Pageants

King Charles VI of France and five of his courtiers were dressed as wild men and chained together for a *masquerade* at the tragic *Bal des Sauvages* which occurred in Paris at the Hôtel Saint-Pol, 28 January 1393. They were "in costumes of linen cloth sewn onto their bodies and soaked in resinous wax or pitch to hold a covering of frazzled hemp, so that they appeared shaggy & hairy from head to foot".[31] In the midst of the festivities, a stray spark from a torch set their flammable costumes ablaze, burning several courtiers to death; the king's own life was saved through quick action by his aunt, Joann, who covered him with her dress.

Renaud de Montauban

A "black and hairy" forest-dwelling outcast is mentioned in the tale of *Renaud de Montauban*, written in the late 12th century.[16]

Martin Schongauer's Wild Men

Sammlung Ludwig – Artefakt und Naturwunder-Schongauer-Wilder Mann80410

The Metropolitan Museum of Art possesses in its collection four heraldic shield prints which feature the wild men. These prints depict wild men presenting the viewer the coat of arms of the print's patrons. Each image is confined within an approximately 78 mm circular composition which is not new to Schongauer's oeuvre.

In *Wild Man Holding a Shield with a Hare and a Shield with a Moor's Head*, the wild man holds two parallel shields, which seem to project from the groin of the central figure. The wild man supports the weight of the shields on two cliffs. The hair on the apex of the wild man's head is adorned with twigs which project outward; as if to make a halo. The wild man does not look directly at the viewer; in fact, he looks down somberly toward the bottom right region of his circular frame. His somber look is reminiscent of that an animal trapped in a zoo as if to suggest that he is upset to have been tamed.

There is a stark contrast between the first print and *Shield with a Greyhound*, held by a Wild Man as this figure stands much more confidently. Holding a bludgeon, he looks past the shield and off into the distance while wearing a crown of vines.

In Schongauer's third print, *Shield with Stag Held by Wild Man*, the figure grasps his bludgeon like a walking stick and steps in the same direction as the stag. He too wears a crown of vines, which trail behind into the wind toward a jagged mountaintop.

In his fourth print, *Wild Woman Holding a Shield with a Lion's Head*, Schongauer depicts a different kind of scene. This scene is more intimate. The image depicts a wild woman sitting on a stump with her suckling offspring at her breast. While the woman's body is covered in hair her face is left bare. She also wears a crown of vines. Then, compared to the other wild men, the wild woman is noticeably disproportionate.

Finally, each print is visually strong enough to stand alone as individual scenes, but when lined up it seems as if they were stamped out of a continuous scene with a circular die.

Early modern representations

The wild man was used as a symbol of mining in late medieval and Renaissance Germany. It appears in this context in the coats of arms of Naila and of Wildemann. The town of Wildemann in the Upper Harz was founded during 1529 by miners who, according to legend, met a wild man and wife when they ventured into the wilds of the Harz mountain range.

Petrus Gonsalvus (born 1537) was referred to by Ulisse Aldrovandi as "the man of the woods" due to his condition, hypertrichosis. Some of his children were also afflicted. It is believed that his marriage to the lady Catherine inspired the fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast*.

In Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1611), the dance of twelve "Satyrs" at the rustic sheep-shearing (IV.iv), prepared by a servant's account:

> Masters, there is three carters, three shepherds, three neat-herds, three swine-herds, that have made themselves all men of hair, they call themselves Saltiers,[32] and they have a dance which the wenches say is a gallimaufrey[33] of gambols...

"Wild Man", c. 1521/22, bronze by Paulus Vischer

The account conflates wild men and satyrs. Shakespeare may have been inspired by the episode of Ben Jonson's masque *Oberon, the Faery Prince* (performed 1 January 1611), where the satyrs have "tawnie wrists" and "shaggy thighs"; they "run leaping and making antique action."[34]

Modern literary representations

The term *wood-woses* or simply *Woses* is used by J. R. R. Tolkien to describe a fictional race of wild men, who are also termed Drúedain, in his books on Middle-earth. According to Tolkien's legendarium, other men, including the Rohirrim, mistook the Drúedain for goblins or other wood-creatures and referred to them as Púkel-men (Goblin-men). He allows the fictional possibility that his Drúedain were the "actual" origin of the wild men of later traditional folklore.[35][T 1]

Pedro Gonzalez. Anon, circa 1580

British poet Ted Hughes used the form *wodwo* as the title of a poem and a 1967 volume of his collected works.[36]

The fictional character Tarzan from Edgar Rice Burroughs' 1912 novel *Tarzan of the Apes* has been described as a modern version of the wild man archetype.[37]

Modern documented representations

The actual document of the feral child was Ng Chhaidy living naked in the jungle of India which her hair and fingernails grew for 38 years that she had become a "wild woman".[38]

Interpretation

The Wild Man has been discussed in Freudian terms as representative of the "potentialities lurking in the heart of every individual, whether primitive or civilized, as his possible incapacity to come to terms with his socially provided world."[39]

Heraldry and art

Late Medieval and Renaissance

Gargoyle, Moulins Cathedral

An early example of the wild man acting as an heraldic supporter appears in the seal of Christian I of Denmark (1450)

Example from 1487

Wild-man supporter from 1589 (arms of the Holzhausen family)

Classicized *Wild Man* design for a stained-glass window, studio of Hans Holbein the Younger, c. 1525–1528 (British Museum)

Tapestry: Wild Men and Moors circa 1440 (Museum of Fine Arts Boston)

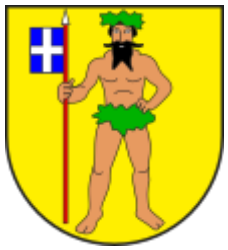
Heraldry

(be) The city of Antwerp, BE-VAN, introduced supporters for its coat of arms during 1881, placing a "wild woman" alongside a wild man.[40]

Royal coat of arms of Denmark

(be) arms of Kortrijk, BE-WVW

(uk) Coat of arms of Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh



(ch) The League of Ten Jurisdictions and Klosters used a wild man on their seals from the 16th century

(cz) arms of Kostelec nad Černými lesy, Prague

(cz) flag of Kostelec nad Černými lesy, Prague

(de) 17th-century Thaler coin from Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel with the traditional wild-man design on coins from the mints in the Harz Mountains

(de) arms of Neuhof an der Zenn, Franconia, DE-BY

(de) arms of Wildemann, part of Clausthal-Zellerfeld, DE-NI

(es) The coat of arms of the Spanish province of Guipuzcoa, which belongs to the autonomous community of the Basque Country. Both wild men are not replicated when representing Guipuzcoa as part of the Coat of arms of the Basque Country.

(fi) Canting coat of arms of the city of Lappeenranta, Finland: The Swedish name of the city is *Villmanstrand*, originally spelled as *Viltmanstrand*

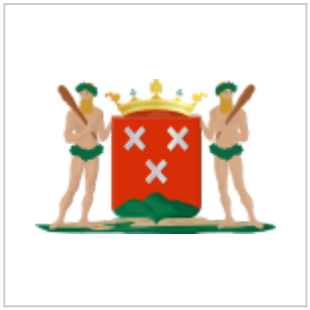
(fi) The coat of arms of the Finnish region of Lapland

(fr) arms of Niort, FR-T

(gr) The Danish Glücksburg dynasty used Heracles as a Hellenic version of a wild man when they became the royal family of Greece.

(lt) coat of arms of Vytautas as Grand duke of Lithuania

(nl) Coat of arms of the Dutch municipality of 's-Hertogenbosch (den Bosch), capital of the province of North Brabant



(nl) Coat of arms of the Dutch municipality of Bergen op Zoom, NL-NB

(nl) arms of the Dutch town of Havelte, a part of the municipality of Westerveld, NL-DR

(nl) arms of the Dutch town of Vries, a part of the municipality of Tynaarlo, NL-DR

(pl) arms of Prabuty, PL-PM

(se) coat of arms of the Swedish region of Lapland, part of Norrland division

(se) coat of arms of Västerbotten County

(uk) demi savage on crest of Scottish clan Murray

See also

- Basajaun
- Bigfoot
- Bugbear
- Caveman
- Enkidu
- Fear liath
- Hamadryad
- Leshy
- Moss people
- Straw bear
- Valentine and Orson
- Yeren
- Yeti
- Noble savage
- Human zoo

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Further reading

- Bergholm, Anna Aune Alexandra. "King, Poet, Seer: Aspects of the Celtic Wild Man Legend in Medieval Literature". In: *FF Network*. 2013; Vol. 43. pp. 4-9.

External links

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